

## 1 THE SCRIPT

How do you write a short film?

There is a certain irony in the question in as much as the secret of writing a short film is the same as writing anything: first, it ain't easy, and second, the secret is there is no secret. It's plain hard work. Scriptwriting is re-writing. Whatever goes down on paper, however well it looks, and with the abundance of scriptwriting programmes, it's probably going to look super, that first gush of words is unlikely to produce anything of great value. What that gush will do is give you something to work with. It is the cloth from which the tailor fashions a suit, the fittings are the re-writes, the new drafts.

It is often said that you should write about what you know about. I would amend that to say, better still, write about what moves you, your passions, dreams and desires. You have to get into the midst of the story before even you, the writer, knows what it is you are trying to say. Character drives plot, but the underlying theme, the message, is what holds the narrative together.

Once you give birth to your characters, they are responsible for their own actions, and the effects caused by those actions. Put a volatile character in a compromising situation and he will swing out with both fists; neither he nor you will be able to prevent it. Put temptation in the way of a thief and just watch his eyes light up as he looks for the main chance. Are we, the reader or viewer, interested in these people? Do we want to follow their story? Do the characters start at point A and shift subtly, cleverly, gradually and convincingly to point B? Will the brute learn self control; the thief not to take what isn't given? Most important: is there conflict? All stories progress through conflict: action and reaction.

Boy asks Girl: Will you go to the movies with me? Girl says: Yes. No conflict, no story. Boy asks Girl: Will you go to the movies with me? Girl says: No. I can't stand men with beards.

Now we have a story. Will he shave off his beard for her? Will he shave it off in order to get her to see the movie with him, then grow it again once they're an item? And if he does regrow his beard, will she break off the relationship?

Now, we have conflict, the grist of every TV soap, but what underpins the story is the theme: the writer's viewpoint, the attitudes and issues the writer wants to explore. A theme can normally be expressed by a well-known saying, in this case: You can't tell a book by looking at the cover. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy discovers there's no place like home. *Rocky* learns if at first you don't succeed, you try, try, try again.

*The Boy With The Beard* is about superficiality, the comical aspects integral to the plot adding light relief, and underpinning the theme. When the Boy sees that the Girl is merely frivolous, he will stop pursuing her. The Girl, oblivious to her own nature, rather than looking in at herself, will look outward and seek ways of punishing the Boy. The initial point of conflict is the beard. The first turning point is when the Boy shaves off his beard to get a date. The plot requires another turning point, the second hook, to swing the story into a new direction.

In this case, we will add the Rival, the key element to most love stories and the third spar in the eternal triangle. Our Rival is a clean-shaven shallow character with an equal fondness for taking girls to the movies. When the Girl goes out with the Rival, she finds him self-centred, conceited, his conversation dull. She still hates beards, but will now look inside herself and realise that she has been superficial worrying over such trivialities. She has started to look inside the book, not just at the cover, and, as if she is looking in the mirror, she will glimpse in the reflection the danger of losing the man she really loves.

It is the emotional journey that holds readers and grabs an audience. To begin with, the Boy was pursuing the Girl. Now, the turnaround is complete. She will start pursuing him, extending the theme and highlighting this aspect of human nature: the tendency to reject what we have and miss it the moment it's gone.

With the story dynamic in flux and the characters now familiar, the scenes should turn with greater urgency, racing us to a conclusion that should achieve two goals:

1. to be both what the audience expects
2. yet not exactly in the way they expect it

The audience wants to be surprised, not disappointed by the obvious.

Each scene should have its own beginning, middle and end, a minor conflict leading to resolution and on to the next scene, the characters growing from each development. The effect is like placing tiles on a mosaic path, each contributing to the story's journey and driving us forward to a satisfying conclusion. If the story has been well told, the characters would have gone through changes. We will have observed their small imperfections, foibles and flaws, the acts of kindness and humanity that add up to the sum total of what they are, a representation of ourselves.

The metaphor of the sculptor releasing the figure from the block of marble is familiar and can be extended to the part played by the writer, the unique mannerisms, word patterns, strengths and weaknesses of his characters laid bare as each new challenge chips away the outer layers to reveal the individual beneath. Our own dreams and deepest desires often remain a mystery to us; we are a collage of inconsistencies. But the writer must know his characters and their motivations; they must remain consistent *even as they change* in order for them to become interesting to the audience.

The Girl of our story will have fallen in love with the Boy for what he is, not how he appears, and will accept his facial hair. The Boy, conscious of her love and aware of the compromises she has made, will stop being so obstinate about his beard, perhaps shave it off for their wedding day, when the priest – this now being a Greek Orthodox story – has the longest beard known to mankind. The Rival, too, will have changed. He lost the girl, but has learned that you can't tell a book by looking at the cover.

*The Boy With The Beard* is a morality play that evolved *while I was writing it*. It began as a romantic comedy, but the weighty undertones could with careful writing and re-writing draw us into new depths: perhaps the Boy is a recent immigrant and wears the beard for religious reasons? Perhaps the Girl was once assaulted by a bearded man carrying a knife and the memory still haunts her?

If we take the cross-cultural theme, I would now name my characters: let's give the Boy the heroic-sounding name Alexander, the Girl Wendy, something fresh and easy on the tongue. The Rival we'll call Dirk, for reasons that will become clear. Writers keep books with titles like 'Naming Your Baby' on their shelves and pay as much attention christening their characters as parents give to naming their new-born infants. In Spain, people remember Don Quixote more than Cervantes, his creator. Great names of fiction live forever in our minds, Scarlett O'Hara, Sam Spade, Luke Skywalker, Lolita, Robin Hood, Nurse Ratched, Scrooge, Bond - James Bond. In *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* the chameleon-like Bob Dylan is named Alias.

The film *In The Heat of the Night* turns on the scene when gum-chewing police chief Rod Steiger asks Sidney Poitier his name.

"So, boy, what do they call you up there in the north?"

"They call me Mr Tibbs."

The response earns Poitier respect and he states his name with such power the producers used the line to title the sequel. Good line, bad script. In the original, Poitier is picked up on a murder rap for no other reason than he's black. His knowledge, detective skills and humanity move the plot along and secure his release, but as a gritty look at Southern racism, the film is not about Poitier, but Steiger, as he comes to terms with his bigotry, his lack of humanity and, for good measure, his personal loneliness.

*They Call Me Mr Tibbs* is about *what it's about*, without subplots or theme; it lacks authenticity, the quality the writer should be striving for. If a scene doesn't work, only by looking for the veracity of the scene, for the authenticity of the characters' needs, desires and actions, will we unearth its weaknesses.

When a scene is stuck in as a device to move the plot along - "*Hi, John, fancy seeing you here. Are you going to Anne's party at the country club Saturday?*" - the filmgoer knows he's being made a fool of, it's a subtle thing like an instrument out of tune in an orchestra, but you can sense it in the auditorium when, instead of watching the screen, people are glancing around or - the ultimate nightmare: talking. You still see the above "Hi, John" scene, or the girlfriend opening a drawer by 'chance' and finding a gun hidden among the handkerchiefs, but this is lazy writing and it's growing harder to get away with it.

In this chapter and throughout the text, examples have been taken from features, not short films, simply because there are so few universally recognised short films to quote from. Writers of short films are presented with special difficulties, the challenge of space and time, or the lack of it. Once they overcome them, they will be ready to write a feature.

Going back to Wendy, if we want to run with the idea that she was assaulted, we could remap the story as gothic horror, a now clean-shaven Alexander becoming an avenging hero who pursues the bearded attacker to a haunted house on a windy clifftop where the rivals fight to the death. And who is the bearded attacker: Dirk, of course, in another guise, so named for the knife he carries.

When I was looking for a story to make the above example, a number of films rushed into my mind. But I needed something less complex, a fable, more than a feature. I was

sitting with my morning coffee flicking through the local paper, avoiding the computer hum in the office next door. Writing is hard; it's always hard, any diversion to avoid it will do. I turned finally to the newspaper's back page and there was an attractive woman and a young man with a full beard pictured at their wedding; in their optimistic expressions was *The Boy With The Beard*, waiting to be found.

According to American writer and scholar Joseph Campbell, the stories are already there, inside us, bursting to come out.

*Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dreamlike mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tsu; now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will be always the one, shape-shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told.*

The above paragraph comes from *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Campbell's analysis of world folk tales that shows how common threads and themes in storytelling bridge the frontiers of culture, religion and time. It was Campbell's study a generation that inspired Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey*, an insider's look at how writers can utilize mythic structures to create powerful narratives that are dramatic, entertaining and psychologically authentic. Since its first publication in 1998, *The Writer's Journey* has become the Hollywood 'bible' on the screenwriting craft.

The stories are there aplenty, in the depths of our own subconscious, and I quote Campbell to counter the post-modern belief that everything under the sun has already been seen and every story has already been told. In writing classes and spats among movie addicts someone will invariably remark that there is only a handful of different stories – the exact number always varies – and writers throughout time just keep retelling them: *The Boy With The Beard* is *Romeo and Juliet*; the man with the fatal flaw – *Achilles*; the precious gift taken away – *Orpheus*; virtue finally recognised – *Cinderella*; a deal with the devil – *Faust*; the spider trapping the fly – *Circe*; change or transformation – *Metamorphosis*; the quest – *Don Quixote*.

To the list we can add the coming-of-age plot (*Gregory's Girl*, *On the Waterfront*); rivals (*Chicago*, *Amadeus*); escape (*The Great Escape*, *The Shawshank Redemption*); revenge (*Hamlet*, *Gladiator*); manipulation (*Svengali*). These stories have been reshaped over and over again, but it is the reshaping and combination of plots that makes them fresh and original. Cross *Romeo and Juliet* with *Cinderella* and what do we end up with: the Richard Gere/Julie Roberts film *Pretty Woman*; change *Cinderella* for *Orpheus* and we have Nabokov's *Lolita*. The genius of George Lucas is that he borrowed from them all to create *Star Wars*, a mythical adventure in the tradition of *Gilgamesh*, the pre-Biblical epic still on the bookshelves today.

We are still discovering species of bird, insect and fish unknown to mankind. Every generation has its own hopes and fears, its own tales to tell: melting ice caps, vanishing rain forests, GM crops, terrorism. What makes our story special, what draws in the reader or viewer, then, is not the underlying mechanics of plot, but the characters. Great

characters move the audience and, as plot unfolds through conflict, great villains make great stories.

Once born, before a word of narrative goes down on paper, writers should sketch out complete biographies of their characters, their ages, idiosyncrasies, disappointments, hopes and dreams, not caricatures or stereotypes, but flesh and blood originals with all the qualities, doubts and nervous tics that make us all one-offs. Characters need a past, a network of relationships. They show just a fraction of this, the tip of the iceberg, and then usually at a time of crisis. But from this study, you should be able to extract the essence of your characters and summarise them in a few sentences. Callie Khouri does it marvellously in her screenplay *Thelma and Louise*, describing Thelma's husband (the perfectly-named carpet salesman Darryl) in three swift brushstrokes:

*Darryl comes trotting down the stairs. Polyester was made for this man and he's dripping in men's jewelry. He manages a Carpeteria.*

*Darryl is checking himself out in the hall mirror and it's obvious he likes what he sees.*

*He exudes overconfidence for reasons that never become apparent. He likes to think of himself as a real lady killer. He is making imperceptible adjustments to his over moussed hair. Thelma watches approvingly.*

What Callie Khouri did was take the traditional buddy movie and put two girls in the lead roles. In the story, while Thelma is finding herself (coming-of-age), Louise is fighting the demons from the past. When they have fully matured into new beings, they know they can never go back to what they were; they are ready for the ultimate metamorphosis: the drive over the cliff edge into the Grand Canyon.

If the characters we create have a tale worth telling, they will *want* something: escape to Mexico, to get the girl, rob the bank, be a star, find El Dorado. A story becomes interesting when the writer sets up obstacles that prevent their heroes getting what they want (Thelma and Louise first lose their money, essential for their flight). The story hooks us as they overcome those obstacles and/or villains and thereby grow and change in the process. As the characters go through a range of emotions: fear, self-doubt, sorrow, elation, the audience will be seeing themselves in the hero or heroine and will be sharing those emotions. If you laugh out loud while reading a book or feel a tear jerk into your eye while you are watching a movie, the writer has done his job.

*Thelma and Louise* is often quoted on film courses and Callie Khouri's script should be on the reading list of every writer who wants to turn their pen to film, shorts or a feature, not only for its pace and dialogue, but for the symbolism neatly woven into the plot. *Thelma and Louise* is about male dominance, Darryl's comic machismo, the attempted rape and the truck driver's lecherous behaviour subliminally underpinning that theme. Male domination is an abstract concept, but Callie Khouri has written scenes as symbols of that concept to make the abstract real and more easy to understand.

On the list of memorable names above is Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The perfect use of symbolism is explored in this movie through the use of the water fountain McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) has failed to budge on the various occasions when he tries to lift it. McMurphy is a free spirit

gradually crushed by the institution. In the final scene, Big Chief (William Sampson) seizes the fountain and crashes it through the bars - to escape from the despotic asylum.

As a sub-plot, Big Chief's strand of the story tells us more about McMurphy, Nurse Ratched and oppression, underlining the theme. Sub-plots contribute colour, comedy and nuance; they serve to confirm the main plot, reveal the contradictions of the principal characters and place obstacles in the hero's path. Characters who serve this function need as much fleshing out and, ideally, will go through changes during the course of events from one state to another, in the case of Big Chief, from tyranny to freedom.

*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* holds our attention because of the power of the characters drawn in Ken Kesey's novel. We as people are interested in the joys and suffering, the ups and downs of other people; at heart everyone is a gossip. Disney cartoons and science fiction monsters are anthropomorphic, and it will take rare skill for a writer to keep us involved in a plot where the hero goes into battle against some anonymous adversary like nature, disease, the tobacco companies or big business. The enemy needs a human face – Christopher Eccleston in Danny Boyle's virus nightmare *28 Days Later*; Michael Douglas as Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*.

In life, the whistle blower usually loses his battle against the corporate giants. It is the role of the writer to put the world back in balance and show us the little guy fighting back; except in downbeat *noir* and ironic tales, people come away from films more satisfied with positive endings. As Oscar Wilde reminds us: The good ended happily, the bad unhappily – that is fiction. Whether it's James Bond entering Ernst Blofeld's fortress, Rocky Balboa in the boxing ring, or Charlie Sheen challenging Michael Douglas in *Wall Street's* final reel, the hero and the antagonist must have this conclusive, face to face confrontation to send the audiences home contented. The little guy rising to the challenge and overcoming evil appeals to our deepest humanity. We are the little guy.

One thing that first-time writers and film-makers need to overcome is that everyone has grown up on the same diet of countless movies and endless hours of television. We know how it's done because we've seen it done, over and over again. It looks easy. Film courses and text books, including this one, light the road before us. The struggle then, as Luis Buñuel understood, is to break the mould of our education and environment, think in fresh ways and use new technology to find our own originality.

*Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade, just as painting does, or music. If you are born knowing them, fine. If not, learn them. Then rearrange the rules to suit yourself.*

What Truman Capote is saying in the above is that storytelling has rules, but like the moon and stars to the navigator at sea, we must still pilot our own course through the darkness.

Imagine a journey by land from London to Athens. We may take the ferry to Bilbao in Spain, cross the Pyrenees and hug the Mediterranean coast. Alternatively, we can take the tunnel to France, slip through Germany and Austria, then follow the Adriatic. The two journeys will be touched by different languages, foods, customs and landscapes; different people with different skills and knowledge will cross our paths

along the way. But the destination is the same and the journey will be the hero's own personal and unique experience, the material face of the more profound internal journey.

All stories, long or short, for film or the written word, benefit from structure. In *The Writer's Journey*, cited above, Christopher Vogler outlines the twelve-stage journey the hero normally takes in those stories we find ultimately satisfying. A short film will lack time for all the intricate stages and archetypes, but a sense of structure is still crucial.

The eight-point guide below remains true to Vogler's principle, but is more practicable for a short film. I have applied the framework to both the short story and short film script in Chapter 9, *Greta May – The Adaptation*, and a careful reading reveals the eight steps that hold the story in place. The eight-point guide is not a formula, but a road map, and the best stories will take the framework and bend it into a new shape. (BOX MATERIAL MARKED IN RED)

-----**Making Short Films Eight-Point Guide**-----

1. Introduce main character(s); set the scene.
2. Give the character a problem, obstacle, obsession or addiction.
3. Let the character work out a plan to overcome the problem.
4. Before setting out to solve the problem, there may be a moment of doubt that will require the hero to seek advice from a mentor: teacher, best friend. This is an opportunity to let the audience know more about the problem and weigh it up in their own minds. What would they do?
5. With new resolve (and often a *magical* gift from the mentor: the watches Q gives James Bond; Dorothy's ruby slippers), the hero sets out to overcome the problem, obstacle, obsession or addiction.
6. Overcoming the problem or challenge (getting the girl; escaping tyranny; saving the world) will be met by extreme opposition from the rival, who will usually have greater but different strengths and will in some ways bear similarities to the hero: the nemesis is the hero's dark side.
7. The hero will appear to fail in his quest. He will glimpse defeat, even death, and will require superhuman effort to overcome this daunting final task.
8. The hero wins the final battle, with an opponent, or enemy, or with himself, and returns to his natural state wiser, or stronger, or cured, but not necessarily happier. The journey has made him a different person. He has glimpsed death and can never go back to the simplicity of what he once was.

To the eight-point guide above, I would add the following recommendations when tackling a script. (BOX MATERIAL IN RED)

-----**Ten Tips**-----

- ?? Don't trust in inspiration, unless you want to be a poet. The first idea you get is often borrowed from every movie you've seen and book you've read.

- ?? If you do work on that inspired project: re-write, re-write; re-write. That is the most important three things you will ever learn about scriptwriting, and I repeat: *re-write, re-write, re-write*.
- ?? See your writing from the other side of the screen, from the audience point of view; if there is no audience, there is no message.
- ?? Do not adjust your writing to the market by attempting to stay abreast, or even ahead of changing trends; such work is a form of cultural static lacking veracity and, often, even relevance.
- ?? Be true to your own vision. Write about what you know about? Absolutely. But then write what you believe in.
- ?? Four steps to writing a short film scenario: find the ending; then the beginning; then the first turning point – the event that gets the story going; then the second turning point, the scene that swings the story around and sets up the ending.
- ?? Enter your story a short time before the crisis that ignites the drama.
- ?? Scenes are like parties: arrive late and leave early.
- ?? Persevere.
- ?? Listen to criticism. But don't always take it.

I repeat the first line of this chapter: How do you write a short film? It requires the same intense work as writing as feature or novel, it's just shorter. Finally, a quote from Jean Cocteau.

Listen carefully to first criticisms of your work. Note just what it is about your work the critics don't like – then cultivate it. That's the part of your work that's individual and worth keeping.

Poet, dramatist, novelist, film director, the kind of guy you could really grow to hate, Cocteau began his career with *The Life of a Poet*, a short film.